

Govt. to take over Grameen Bank?

Plan to fragment it totally unacceptable

FOR the love of God, tell us why a functioning and enormously beneficial institution like the Grameen Bank would need restructuring or any reform? When there are so many losing and dysfunctional state-owned enterprises in dire need of reform, toying with the Grameen Bank is supremely ironical as well as outrageous. The plan to divide Grameen Bank into 19 separate entities and then, appoint 100 Directors to run those is plain monopolisation and politicisation of the highest order. According to this paper's news item on June 18, Grameen Bank Inquiry Commission's recommendations are set to do just that.

This is a bid to break up a thoroughly functional and workable financial institution owned by some 8.4million poor women, of whom 5million own shares in the bank. Were this transformation to go through and 19 totally independent enterprises to emerge, none of which would have any links to one another – precisely how would the shareholders benefit? The Grameen Bank is a tested and proven model, one that is being emulated across the globe for spreading microfinance in both developing and developed economies. We strongly urge the government to pull back from what is clearly a vindictive attempt to hound and harass a man who has brought honour and dignity to Bangladesh. Such blatant attempts at politicisation will only end in hurting the poor women shareholders, whose lot has definitely changed for the better since their association with Grameen Bank.

Obnoxious remarks Sanctity of the House marred

WE are dumbfounded by the extremely derogatory remarks used by a Treasury Bench lawmaker against the opposition leader in parliament. AL MP Nazma Akhter during the budget discussions on Monday hurled slanders against Khaleda Zia questioning her and her family's religious origin. This is utterly in bad taste.

It is a female lawmaker who has smeared the image of her own kind, who are looked upon as a symbol of sanctity in our tradition-based society.

This is the height of unparliamentariness, which is thoroughly reprehensible.

Earlier, in this column we critiqued as well as expressed our disappointment over similar instances of scandalous abuse of parliamentary prerogatives by lawmakers from either Bench in the JS.

But repetition of such foul-mouthed outbursts on the floor of the House shows that some of our elected public representatives have little concern for public sensitivities.

The lawmaker in question was not only being uncivil, she was also speaking out of context. She was engaged in character assassination of the leader of the opposition when she was expected to confine herself to budget discussion. By such an act, she not only wasted precious time of parliament, but also brought down the image of public representatives.

Such use of abusive language on the Jatiya Sangsad floor must stop in order to restore its sanctity and turn it into a distinguished institution of the people in the true sense of the term.



They said...

THE results of the recent four city corporation elections have evinced variegated and interesting comments from various quarters, particularly from the Awami League. Of particular interest is the one made by Latif Siddique, minister for textile and jute, who said, on what can be seen as an indictment of the party's internal squabbles that the result was not defeat of the Awami League but of the 'bad characters' in the party. He made the comments at a party gathering in Tangail on June 16.

We say...

WE thank the minister for his frank admission, that it was the 'bad people' who were defeated.

In saying this minister has in fact admitted that there are indeed 'bad people' in the party and those that contested for the mayoral posts were 'bad people'. In that case what are we to make of the fact that these 'bad people' were lent both blessings and support of the AL. Were that not so than how come so many senior party leaders including ministers descended on the four cities and openly canvassed for the candidates?

The minister's remark is a poor attempt at explaining away the comprehensive defeat of the AL candidates. The comment is fairly representative of the general psyche of the party leadership, except of course a few honest exceptions.

But is admitting presence of 'bad people' in the party enough? Can we ask why bad people are allowed to exist in the party at all? The AL will do well to accept the reality and make objective assessment of the election results and not hide behind verbal subterfuge. That will help make necessary rectifications to face the impending general election.



The relevance of Ataturk

GROUND REALITIES



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

DEMOCRACY sometimes puts enlightenment at risk. Sure, one will not question the idea that for all its flaws, democracy remains the best form of government that a nation might choose for itself. But that thought suffers a jolt when you see a democratic movement, such as the one that deposed the despised Shah in Iran in 1979 swiftly commandeered by clerics whose take on democracy is vastly removed from ours. But why go so far? The recent city corporation elections in Bangladesh, while they are putatively a triumph for political pluralism and of which some of us may feel quite proud, have thrown up a queer situation.

And the queer is in the brazen abandon with which religious fanatics went around telling people that the elections were a choice between believers and atheists. Now, that begs the question: is Bangladesh a secular state in the real sense of the meaning? If it is, how did these right-wingers, at this point so much of an overpowering influence on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, so freely and without any check play the religion card against the Awami League at the elections? They went from door-to-door with copies of the Quran, asking voters to swear by the holy book that they would not vote for atheists. No one -- not the Election Commission, not the law enforcers, not the courts -- stepped in to warn these campaigners that they were in violation of election laws. More tellingly, no theologian appeared to be there to inform these clerics that the Quran is not a book you carry lightly, that it is scripture whose purity must not be trifled with.

But, yes, it all came to pass in the democratic scheme of things. The state, despite officially being secular, remains weak to a point where it is unwilling to deal with bigotry head on. Much as the Awami League would like you to know that it believes in secular democracy, you remain appalled at the invocation of religion you often spot on the posters it puts out on the streets. That, as many will inform you, is one way of reassuring voters that it too is respectful towards religion. Of course it is. But the point here is something else: in the scramble for votes, the party is not ready to fall behind those elements whose blatant use of Islam has brought this country to this present sorry pass. The communal basis of the BNP is something you understand, for its founder happened to be the military ruler who swiftly did away with the sovereignty of the people as enshrined in the nation's constitution and replaced it with belief in Allah. But what you certainly have a hard time getting used to is this new reality of the Begum and her party falling under the shadow of the Jamaatis and the Hefajatis. The BNP might think it is on top of things. The truth is something else: the Islamists have taken over the BNP.



How much of democracy is enough for this country for it to live in good health and good cheer? The response is patently clear: we will have democracy all the way.

The portents are dark and therefore uncomfortable. If so many people in this country truly believe that secularists are really atheists, that indeed the peddlers of faith are Allah's chosen ones, there is a deep malaise abroad in the land. And it calls for purposeful, even harsh handling, in the way that Kemal Ataturk handled obscurantism in Turkey in the 1920s. He remains relevant, and not just for Turkey. His legacy of the creation and preservation of an absolutely secular Turkey has endured, with the country's army on standby to ensure that the principle is not trifled with. You may have the Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdogan in power; you may have a section of Turkey's women taking to the hijab. But none of that has affected the country's secular nature. No one, not even Erdogan, will tamper with the Kemalists interpretation of politics in Turkey.

Which makes you wonder if Bangladesh at a certain stage will throw up an Ataturk to retrieve itself from the grasping, fanatical hands it has been falling into. The prospects are dim, unless the nation's secular forces -- the Awami League, the communists, the Workers Party, et al -- are willing to give themselves a heave-ho and decisively turn Bangladesh back on the path to social decency and fundamental political morality. That is a necessary job. With the Hefajatis calling forth the audacity to hurl a so-called thirteen-point demand at the nation, it is neo-medievalism which threatens our visions of a luminous future. You accept the thirteen points. Or you appease the men behind these points through ludicrous promises. And what you are then left with is a nation without a future. That future is already under threat, now that with the Hefajatis the BNP-wallahs have, or think they have, stormed the citadels of secularism and rushed in through the gates of four cities.

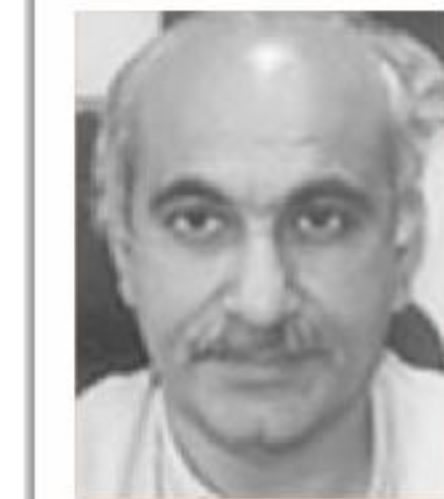
So how much of democracy is enough for this country for it to live in good health and good cheer? The response is patently clear: we will have democracy all the way. But democracy is again a political process which has no room for militants or fanatics or bigots of any and all kinds. If you want democracy, you must first convince yourself that the principles of your life are secular. Democracy which looks the other way when a mob of fanatics cheerfully denounces a huge crowd of liberal and decent people as atheists, is democracy one is hardly in need of. You cannot have democracy and yet indulge sections of the media that offend citizens' sensibilities through indecent exposure. It is not pluralistic politics you promote when the state has little authority to bring Qawmi madrasas to heel. Democracy dies a painful and shameful death when your Hindus, your Christians, your Buddhists, your indigenous people are pushed to the fringes because you are part of a brute majority, because you have appropriated God to yourself.

These city corporation elections are, yes, a wake-up call to the powers that be. More ominously, they point to the darkness that might, sooner rather than later, loom over this land of poetry and songs and Sufism and a multitude of faiths. The lights are going out. Must they?

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Shifting sands make for shifting stands

BYLINE



M.J. AKBAR

The casino is being cleared once again. Old bets are off. But politicians can only come to a new table with chips loaned by familiar vote banks.

MARGARET Thatcher, who led Britain's Conservatives from confusion into the promised land of three election victories, believed that a political party must serve as a vehicle to capture power, not limp along as a platform for views. Ideas were a mirage unless anchored in the oasis of government.

The BJP is in search of its Thatcher. Transformative change often needs the gloom of a crisis. There are two models for revitalisation. In 1969, Mrs. Indira Gandhi split Congress because it had become a hippopotamus, wallowing in its own quagmire. Thatcher, straddling the same span between collapse and opportunity in 1975, did not wield an axe because she was confident that her party could accommodate the past without sacrificing the future. Both Ms. Gandhi and Thatcher were called divisive, but they understood that they had to be on the positive side of the dividing line. They had to offer solutions to a despairing electorate.

It has taken about a quarter century for a generational challenge within BJP to rise from simmer to surge. The party became a credible force in 1989, when it won 85 Lok Sabha seats. Under AB Vajpayee and LK Advani, BJP climbed to 180 MPs and deftly crafted the NDA to fashion a stable alliance. But questions inevitably arise during the forlorn years of defeat, when fusion unravels into confusion.

Alliance politics also has two models, informal and formal. Ms. Gandhi launched coalition culture in Delhi with a breathtaking swivel in 1969. She grasped the hand of Marxists who had been imprisoned by her father Jawaharlal Nehru for suspected sedition just seven years before, during the epochal war with China. But she would not let them into her Cabinet. Narasimha Rao survived through informal relationships. Atal Behari Vajpayee preferred formal partners. UPA has managed a decade-long coalition with both formal and informal allies.

There is nothing sentimental about power. Ms. Indira Gandhi kept the Left inside only as long as she needed them, for either domestic or foreign policy. (The Left was very helpful in forging her alliance with the Soviet Union before the Bangladesh war.) Smaller parties have drawn their own lessons. The principal one is unsurprising. They can maximise their benefits only when a Congress or BJP is vulnerable enough to listen, but not weak enough to die.

The present impasse is more complex. Both government and opposition have disappeared, the first replaced by aggressive paralysis, the second by rampant turmoil. A Congress that cannot pass an ordinance on food security is a passenger stranded on a platform long after the train has passed. A BJP torn by internal and external dissent is a train that has not left the station.

History is never so silly as to repeat itself, but there are echoes. We are in a phase similar to Rao's last year in office. Both Congress and BJP seem as friendless now as they did nearly twenty years ago. When circumstances become so fluid, small parties test how far they can swim, and look for a port only after having measured their strength. Ambitions rise, for they know coalitions will emerge after elections, not before. Both NDA and UPA were post-election formations.

For every Deve Gowda waiting for an astrologer's prediction to come true, there are three Gowda advisers waiting to become finance minister of India. The pressure to buy a lottery ticket becomes huge.

Politics becomes a siren. Ideology is tailored to opportunity. The BJP-Janata Dal (U) marriage developed eczema long before divorce, but convenience camouflaged differences. Nitish Kumar wed BJP when the Ram temple was at the top of BJP's agenda, and remained in Vajpayee's Cabinet after the Gujarat riots because he needed BJP's help to become chief minister of Bihar. And BJP had no problems in Bihar with what it described as "minority appeasement" elsewhere.

The casino is being cleared once again. Old bets are off. But politicians can only come to a new table with chips loaned by familiar vote banks.

Alas, if you depend too much on past arithmetic, you could miss emerging algebra. Politics as usual is insufficient for an India in churn. Old constructs have weakened visibly. Marxists are no longer principal guardians of "Left-secularism;" for Nitish Kumar and Naveen Patnaik, Mamata Banerjee will do very nicely instead. The Third Front is not what it was in 1996 and 1997, when it could elect a PM. It is a bargaining instrument to maximise the cash flow to Bengal, Bihar and Odissa as price of support to the next Union government.

Who will form it? Simple, again. Position play will surrender to numbers. When Vajpayee got 180 seats, the BJP did not look as saffron as it did when it had only 85 MPs. Which party will get the MPs? Whichever understands the mood of the moment. As another successful vote-winner, Bill Clinton, told his opponents on his way to the White House: It's the economics, stupid.

The writer is Editor of *The Sunday Guardian*, published from Delhi, India on Sunday, published from London and Editorial Director, *India Today* and *Headlines Today*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Repair Uttara roads

I would like to draw the attention of the authorities concerned to repair the roads of Uttara Model Town immediately. Driving is not safe on those roads as there are potholes almost everywhere. I have been living in Uttara for more than 16 years. At present these roads are totally unfit for use. Since a good number of schools, colleges and universities are situated here, a large number of students travel through these roads. Their parents remain worried all day until they return home. The main road is quite good but the lanes and by-lanes are not suitable for use.

We request the authorities concerned to take measures for repairing the roads.

Aan Shah
Uttara, Dhaka

Incivilities at Sangsad

What has been reported in TDS on June 10 is highly condemnable. Those who used abusive language in the parliament against fellow women are likely to be paid back by the same coin.

One can easily question the taste and linguistic choice of a parliamentarian. If everybody starts talking in local language in the 'Sangsad' to hoodwink the targeted members, then one can easily recommend that Bangladesh can be better served by a system which would disown a 'Sangsad' like the one running without any purpose. One can vote for boycott rather than keeping an uncivilised 'Sangsad' open.

Anami
CA, USA

BSF brutality

BSF's brutality on Bangladeshi people has crossed the limit. Its members recently killed two Bangladeshis and then begged pardon. If saying 'sorry' is enough, then what is the use of law or bilateral relation?

We are pained to see such continuous brutalities by BSF even after having a 'friendly' relation with India. We have been observing that after every incident of killing, the BSF head promises that there will be no repetition of such incidents. But, after a few days, the same thing happens. Is it not a contemptible breach of trust? Is it not violation of international laws, norms of humanity, civility and good neighbourly conduct? Is there any other place in the world where such things happen?

Rafik Alamgir
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Comments on news report, "Triumph of 'atheist' card," published on June 17, 2013

Dev Saha

Being atheist is not sinful or a crime! Be God-fearing as much you wish, but do not feed us with lies! If these lies are being used for election, then we have reached our newest low point.

Samih34

I find this Star report quite baffling because on the back page of the same issue of TDS, the news report titled 'What went wrong for them' gives a completely different picture that voters voted against 14-party backed candidates because of their various failures and the Jubo League and BCL goons' plundering of others' properties.

M. Ashraf

The fact that government has failed to curb corruption and shamelessly supported their minions beyond the legal system may have something to do with their utter and dismal loss. This is an indication that the ball is now in BNP's court and it is their turn to destroy the economy of the country for the next few years as AL has done in the last few years.

Biswajyoti Roy

Doing enough development activities may not necessarily bring you a victory, but playing the religion card cunningly can.

MH Khan

The AL created a lot of mishaps in the recent past. They tried to manipulate the Shahbag protest to the extent that it was not sustainable and at the same time they tried to play with fire, the mischievous Hefajatis. Probably the AL should learn where to slow down and where to stop.

Shaheen K

It is a shame how you are trying to taint the victory of the people by trying to implicate the victory being connected to Hefajat.

Raf Chow

Corruption, arrogance and blatant abuse of absolute power were the main reasons for this downfall.

"BNP feasts on AL failures" (June 17, 2013)

Muhammad Lateef

Results of the country's major city corporation polls have once again established the "fact" that, Bangladeshis are necessarily patriots but at the same time are aware of the importance of their faith and belief system. By producing one-sided propaganda a short-lived success may be achieved but eventually it backfires and this is what precisely happened.

zerosopher

BNP has a lesson to learn from AL's failure. Bring honesty supported by vision and professionalism. Otherwise it will not take longer for people to throw them away as well.

cernventure

No ideological change will happen in Bangladesh politics as long as the mindset of some people does not change drastically.